Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 4 Disabled People in Media & Journalism

Guests: Vilissa Thompson and s.e. smith

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[music]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey hey! My name is Alice Wong, and I'm host of the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. Media representation: This is a topic I could talk about for hours.

Today's episode is on disabled people in media and journalism. s.e. smith, a social justice journalist and Vilissa Thompson, a disability rights consultant, writer, and advocate, join me in a conversation on how editors and newsrooms can improve media coverage of disabled people and what they can do to increase newsroom disability diversity. Both Vilissa and I are co-partners in a new project created by s.e. called DisabledWriters.com, an online database of disabled writers and sources for editors and media organizations.

There are many marginalized communities pushing for better representation in media, but what does that really mean? What does it look like? In this episode, we explore these questions and more. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

ALICE: So Vilissa and s.e., thank you so much for joining me today.

VILISSA: My name is Vilissa Thompson. I am the founder of Ramp Your Voice, I'm a Social Worker, and I reside in South Carolina. I'm a disability rights consultant, writer, and advocate. I am the creator of the #DisabilityTooWhite hashtag that went viral in 2016. I am one half of the Wheelin' & Dealin' podcast on the CSPN network that I cohost with Neil Carter. And I am a proud troublemaker.

ALICE: Amen to that.

VILISSA: [laughs]

s.e.: As advertised, I'm s.e. smith. I'm a Northern California-based journalist, and I've been active in the field for over 10 years. I cover social justice from an intersectional perspective with a heavy focus on gender, disability issues, and transgender rights. Also, I really love cats.

ALICE: Who doesn't love cats? Yeah.

VILISSA: Yes, for real. [laughs]

Disability representation in journalism

ALICE: What have you seen in the last few years with disability representation in journalism that's problematic, and what are some examples of encouraging signs that representation is improving?

s.e.: What I see most often is that disability is rarely covered, and when it is, the coverage tends to be very patronizing, simplistic, and infantalizing. And it doesn't acknowledge the fact that we have a vested interested in social equality and justice. That said, I am seeing a slow shift towards hiring actual disabled journalists, quoting disabled experts, and promoting more comprehensive coverage. Jeff Stein's coverage of the ACA protests spearheaded by ADAPT was a really great example of thoughtful, meticulous, empowering reporting that kind of went into policy and profiling the activists as people rather than wheelchairs.

ALICE: Jeff Stein's live tweets of the various protests were really great. This is the reporting that I wanna see. How about you, Vilissa?

VILISSA: A little bit of what s.e. said about the inspiration porn, feel-good stories. And for me, seeing those type of headlines can be very harmful to the understanding of what disability is and isn't. When we do see disability, it centers the family members or the caregivers and doesn't really center them. That's just so ridiculous 'cause you never see that with other portrayals in the news. Typically, the stories tend to be about disabled white people, and if they're not white, then showing the disabled person not having a lot, despair looking.

I'm also seeing this unique thing when it comes to police violence, the erasure of that disabled person's disability status. So that's something that, to me, is very problematic in the reporting and not giving the whole picture, particularly when it comes to police violence. If the disability is erased, advocates call that out and demand that news coverage add their disability in there. So, I think that community, when it comes to negative portrayals or inaccurate portrayals, is doing a good job at calling those out and demanding that reporters, journalists, etc. do a better job in depicting the whole picture of disability and all the elements that are involved.

ALICE: Yeah. I mean, I think a lot about the hashtag you created, #DisabilityTooWhite. It just seems like an overwhelming number of people who get to be interviewed or who are doing the interviewing are white. And this speaks to the overwhelming whiteness of disabled reporters and coverage.

And s.e., getting back to your comment about seeing more reporters who identify as a disabled person, there must be a lot of reporters and people in media who are disabled but do not identify in any way.

s.e.: There are a lot of reporters who either leave their disability status kind of questionable or don't specifically out themselves as disabled or have an impairment that many people would consider disabling, who say that they're not disabled. There's a lot of pressure right now towards personal stories. And a lot of journalists don't want to be the story; they want to tell the story. By outing your identity, you kind of tend to get experiences with editors that can be very frustrating. It's certainly something I've had where people say, "Oh, but what's your perspective as a

disabled person on this?" My goal is not to tell a story as a disabled person; it's to tell a story about disability that needs to be told.

I was talking with a mentally ill person who is not out about her illness, about the newsroom pressures that surround mental health. She said, "You know, when I got started, it almost seemed like newsrooms were silently accommodating of crazy people. You just made allowances for this person works this way. But in recent years, that has kind of shifted, and being known as difficult or requesting accommodations can make it really challenging to get a newsroom job."

Structural and culture issues and ableism in journalism

ALICE: Yeah, I imagine there's such fear and ableism that's still within these workplaces. So, what can help improve that? How do we work our way to getting people to understand the structural and cultural issues?

s.e.: Part of improving newsroom visibility is boosting the signal of disabled journalists who are out, to show hey, there is a market for serious journalism written by disabled people, and to create a space for other people to come out of the shadows. It's great if you have disabled journalists, but if you have no disabled editors, you're still gonna face some pretty fundamental barriers. It's telling to me that a lot of the high-profile disabled journalists who are open about their disabilities are white. You can't only have white disabled people representing the disability community in media.

ALICE: I think for the ones that I can count on my fingers, they seem to be mostly cisgender men. So, s.e., related to that, you've worked for a number of publications. What are the challenges you face in pitching to editors and getting assignments?

s.e.: Andi Zeisler and everyone at Bitch is amazing. Jessica Reed, my editor at The Guardian, was actually one of the first editors at a mainstream publication to give me a chance. The team at Rewire is awesome. I love my editor, Kat Jercich. And I love that Rewire has really gone all in on expanding the breadth of their disability coverage. They were also very open when I challenged them on predominantly using the medical model on the site, and that's an experience that's actually been mirrored elsewhere with a lot of publications I've written for. So, I feel like publications I work with regularly work with me, in part, because they value disability coverage.

For me, where it gets really tough is in convincing other publications that they actually do need disability coverage. Sometimes that conversation goes really well. Earlier this year, I approached Megan Greenwell while she was still at Esquire and said, "Hey, you have almost no disability coverage on this site. Would you like an article about Medicaid?" And it proved to be one of the best articles I've written this year, I think. She's a fantastic editor, and it was great to work with her. And at other times, it feels like editors agree with me, but they're constrained by budgets and highers-up, or they just don't see what the problem is. Or they want coverage that's pegged to a personal story, rather than a larger social issue.

Journalism very much is about who you know and who you can get introductions to. This is a problem that editors seem to be recognizing now. More of them are much more open about their pitching guidelines and encouraging people to pitch and saying they want to hear from people

without clips and industry connections. But I'm not always seeing that borne out in terms of what they're commissioning and who they're commissioning it from.

[music break]

The difference between non-disabled and disabled reporters covering disability topics

ALICE: When it comes to writing about disabled people or issues in the disability community, what is the difference between non-disabled reporters and disabled reporters? Does it matter as long as these writers have the skills and are respectful of the community that they cover?

VILISSA: So, for me, I can definitely tell when it's written by a disabled person or not. When you read these stories, particularly by non-disabled writers and journalists, to me, the authenticity isn't there. You can tell when a disabled person write about a story that's close to them, whether it's their direct story, or they're talking about a social issue. You can feel that emotion; you can feel that relationship to the piece. Even if it is written by a disabled person, if they do not have a connection to that topic, particularly with race or LGBT issues, you can also feel that disconnect there as well.

I think skilled writers understand their limitations in telling a story that's either outside of their identities or outside of their scope, and they do their best to insert the voices that are missing. Even if you are a non-disabled person writing about disability issues, you can still learn how to speak on that and get it as right as you can. You should also seek to get disabled perspectives within that story.

I know for me as a writer, if I make it a point to write about a disability that's not mine, I'm going to do my best to ensure that I'm using the right terminology; I'm talking about it in a way that's empowering and not offensive. That is a conscious effort that I make within my work.

s.e.: I've definitely seen non-disabled journalists, or non-disabled to the best of my knowledge, do great work. But as long as their voices dominate the landscape of disability coverage, they're at inherent advantage. This isn't just about whether someone can be respectful or whether someone is a really good writer or whether someone can do the research or whether someone can approach a subject responsibly, but whether that person is sucking opportunities away from others. Because the market for disability reporting in particular is very small. Whenever I see a piece commissioned, my first thought is often, "Who got passed over for this to be published?" That's true of any marginalized group in journalism.

I'm at an inherent advantage because I'm white. So, the question shouldn't be whether I could cover a subject like police shootings responsibly, but whether I should, regardless of skills and intent. This is a conversation that we need to have.

ALICE: When one person or several people are known to be really great at writing and covering disabled people, these are the same names that come up again and again. And what’s sad is there's a whole universe of people out there that can also offer their talents.

s.e.: Well, and someone was joking about this the other day. It was an editor, not someone I work with, who said, "Every time I search for something on disability, I find you and these two other journalists."

It is deeply disturbing that you think three people are the arbiters and authority on all disability issues, given the huge diversity of issues facing the disability community: Sub-minimum wages, abuse of LGBQT elders in nursing homes, police shootings, or education. There is so much to cover that I wouldn't want to try to cover in totality, and it's troubling to me that people think that's possible.

VILISSA: With that particular editor, OK, I've seen these same three names over and over again, to me, that would kind of ring an alarm in my head to say that, if I'm seeing the same three names, then that means that there are writers, journalists, and perspectives that are missing. So, it really kinda perplexes me that editors and those within this realm don't see that as a problem. And they're not realizing that their inability to see it as a problem perpetuates the problem.

s.e.: Media consumers also need to be accountable. It's really up to them to contact media outlets to complain, to praise them when they get the story right, to ask why an issue isn't being discussed, to ask a news organization to consider reframing. And it's really important to push your family and friends to do this also, to make it clear that there is an audience for responsible disability journalism. That includes not falling for clickbait, to stop circulating inspiration porn, and to really do better by being more selective and more contentious about what you choose to click on and read and what you choose to share.

It's a really uphill battle to fight when editors say, "Well, but we got 70,000 hits on the picture about cute wheelchair dogs. What do you mean you wanna do a 7,000-word investigative feature on exploitation of disabled workers by Goodwill?" So that's something that people need to be a little more conscious about.

ALICE: Great. Thank you for that.

What changes do you want to see in covering disability?

ALICE: Now, what are some changes that you would like to see in news organizations, on how they frame disability in their stories, and how they greenlight stories or increase coverage of disabled people on their publications, websites, etc.?

VILISSA: Well, first of all, are you covering disability? If you are not, why? Reach out to people who you feel that can cover the stories that fits your platform, that fits the stories that you want to tell. Basically, just hire disabled people. It's not that hard. We have a plethora of bloggers, of vloggers, writers who, to me, I consider underground--I consider myself underground still--you are writing fantastic pieces. So really do the work to find out who these writers are, who's really talking about the key issues that the community cares about or talking about issues that intersect disability in key social, political areas and hire them. I really think that it's time for editors to stop being lazy. And also, be more responsible and hold yourself accountable to the disability story that you may be telling and to stop doing some of what we discussed earlier, inspirational porn. We don't wanna see that. Those stories are just for non-disabled people to feel good about themselves. You know, that does nothing to propel the collective thinking and movement of disabled community.

s.e.: I would like to see newsrooms learn from disabled media advocates about issues of importance to the disability community, to kind of challenge them to think about how to expand the scope of their coverage. I'd also like to see disability as a specific beat that should be

treated not as a subset of healthcare or culture but as its own specific issue that needs to be covered in depth. And I'd like to see a lot more deep investigative coverage. Reveal and FRONTLINE have done some really great stuff on exploitation and abuse in care settings. Those stories got huge responses. So, it's clear that audiences want that media, and they're not getting it.

And I'd really like to see newsrooms making a more conscious choice about how they choose to frame disability in their stories. Maybe your disability coverage would be better and more inclusive if you explicitly used the Social Model and understand why people advocate for it. Newsrooms definitely need to be moving away from viewing non-disabled people, especially parents, as authorities on disability, and honestly at this point, as people with anything to add to the conversation. Because there are so many fantastic disabled voices that are suppressed because they're challenging, or they're "too difficult," or it's too much work to find them. Those people are out there, and they're very visible. So, you're kind of making a conscious effort to exclude them from your coverage.

ALICE: Yeah, and it's also about telling journalists there is more than one way to do an interview. They've gotta expand and be open to new ways of reporting. With the few reporters I've talked to, some are very still in a mode of having questions on the phone. And what I'll usually say is, "Oh, by the way, is it OK if I just answer your questions via email? Some days are hard for me, especially with the time difference, and I can always go back and forth if you have follow-ups." And it's amazing sometimes the resistance I get with that. But that's mode of communication that's what I prefer. So, I think part of that is just pushing people to really expand what they think of as typical journalistic methods.

[music break]

Vilissa and s.e.'s current media and journalism projects

ALICE: So Vilissa, you recently launched a new podcast with your cohost Neal Carter called 'Wheelin' & Dealin' Politics Podcast.' What drew you to podcasting?

VILISSA: Well, I've always been interested in podcasting for a while now but never really wanted to do it by myself. Always kinda wanted to have a cohost. Really not into the whole techy part of podcasting! Neil reached out to me with this idea that had of doing a political-themed podcast. I've always been interested in politics due to my grandmother, who was very plugged into the news. And we just did our debut episode. I feel that this is the prime time to create something like this to where you have two Black disabled people doing a podcast together. Which isn't something that exists at this point, you know, talking about politics and framing it in a way that is relatable to everyone, particularly Black audiences, since we're on the CSPN network. And also, not-Black audiences, and just really make politics relatable.

From the reactions so far that we've received, we seem to be filling in that gap. I feel that that's a theme that kind of recurs in my life, in the projects that I take on. Again, it's always looking to see how I can fill in this gap that's missing when it comes to certain issues or different perspectives. It's a very new adventure that I'm happy to be a part of.

ALICE: You know, the potential is limitless, and that's really exciting to me to see more people get involved in creating their own media and not waiting for these organizations to finally understand that they need to do this.

So s.e., you recently created DisabledWriters.com this past June with Vilissa and me as your co-partners. Can you tell me a little bit about the purpose of the website and what it's been like since it launched?

s.e.: Well, I've been saying off and on for a few years that we really need a database of disabled journalists to make it easier for editors to find us, with the goal of diversifying newsrooms, and also the need to supplement that with diverse sources. And this kind of usually took the form of late-night joking on Twitter. And then this year, when Congress started attacking healthcare, I kept noticing that disability was absent from the coverage until the ADAPT actions started going high-profile. Even then, it was mostly non-disabled people with this, "Oh, gosh golly!" attitude. Like, "Oh, wow! Even disabled people are protesting!" Or, "Look at these people in wheelchairs being carried out of the Speaker's office!" That was the moment when I knew that I had to actually launch the project, which met with a lot of initial success. I think we had 100 profiles up within the first 60 days. I encourage members to ping me when they get stories or leads through the database. We've definitely been able to place a few stories through editors and through reporters searching the database for sources. So, it's clearly a resource that was needed.

I talk informally with editors because I wanna make sure that this is a database that they view as valuable and think of as a resource. I'm hoping that other journalists are using the resource this way as well.

ALICE: I love to see the latest writers added to Disabled Writers dot com. I mean, the range is amazing, and you've got people from all over the world. It's pretty intersectional as well. In a lot of ways, there are no excuses anymore for editors who keep saying, "Oh, I don't know where to go!" Or, "There are no writers who do this!" Clearly, we are out there.

s.e.: Well, and something else I'm trying to do with the project is to expand the conversation on newsroom diversity. Newsroom diversity means considering disabled people for all positions and all stories. This would, I think, kind of help push back on the feeling where people do get pigeonholed into coverage they're not interested in doing or are frankly bad at because they don't like doing it. So, the goal is head to this database, and see if there's someone who might be a good fit for you even if you're not specifically looking for a disabled writer or a disabled source.

ALICE: Vilissa, your website, Ramp Your Voice, publishes interviews, blog posts, and a lot of great educational materials that's centered on Black disabled people, especially Black disabled women. Ramp Your Voice celebrated its 4th anniversary earlier this year. Where do you wanna be in the next four years in terms of your media and what you wanna create?

VILISSA: You know, when I created Ramp Your Voice, it was a way for me to write about topics that I wanted to read about [laughs], that I wish was there through an intersectional lens. It's just been an incredible journey these past four years to be in a position where I can speak very unapologetically about racism and other emotionally-charged topics, and people listen, and they reflect and hopefully do better within their personal and professional lives. Right now, I'm in the process of creating a Patreon page where I can share exclusive content. 'Cause I feel that if I wanna do the educating, then I need to be paid for that. That's extensive labor that Black disabled people and other disabled people of color do to educate whites.

Right now, I have over 200 articles under my belt, and there are certain things that I really want to write more about. Some of the projects include focusing more on Black women and our

health, particularly since a lot of Black women may not identify as having a disability. But they definitely do have a disability with their health issues. I know that in our community, self-identifying is a journey. I want to be very welcoming and open to those women who are on that journey but also give them the space to talk about where they are when it comes to their health and the barriers that they face.

And also working more extensively on the #DisabilityTooWhite to really target the way that we, in our community, discuss and understand race, particularly for white disabled people. And project, I really want to break down what is racism, and what does it look like, and how do you, as a white disabled person, even a non-disabled white person, how do you factor in there? And also, in some ways calling out non-Black people of color too and the anti-blackness that can exist.

And I also am working towards doing more speaking engagements and presentations, which I enjoy doing. And just constantly learn how to interweave disability within the areas that people don't consider it being in. And I'm very fortunate to be able to do that. Disability needs to be in every topic discussion, with the way that society is right now.

ALICE: How about you, s.e.? What is your vision for the future of Disabled Writers dot com?

s.e.: Well, one thing I'm doing is exploring the possibility of applying for grants and other financial assistance to be able to dedicate more time to it and to really expand what we're doing. I definitely wanna see writers making meaningful connections that lead to opportunities beyond freelancing.

I also really want to expand our professional development opportunities. Because a lot of the people in the database are very inexperienced, they face a lot of barriers to entering journalism. They certainly didn't go to journalism school. Some of them have no higher education. We have been doing an off-and-on series of posts about common questions and issues that come up. We do moderated chats, which are super helpful. But I also want to get involved with mentoring opportunities and partnerships with media organizations to set up placements and paid internship positions and to create more solid opportunities for connections and more of a future in journalism.

The really important thing for me, though, is that it needs to be intersectional. If we are creating all of these great benefits and opportunities, and they're going to straight, white, cisgender disabled people, that's not what the database is for. Members of the disability community from a wide variety of backgrounds aren't just welcome in the database but are enthusiastically encouraged to be in it. And we want to provide support that works for people for wherever they're coming from. And so, we need to make sure that we're considering issues like can we have remote internships for people who can't work in a newsroom for a variety of reasons? And can we set up internships with more flexible hours? And that includes educating newsrooms about hey, if you want to be serious about diversifying and having disabled interns, you need to understand how accommodations work and how we can be an asset in the newsroom even though we may work in ways that are unconventional at times.

[music break]

Wrap-up

ALICE: Vilissa, how can people find you?

VILISSA: Well, you can find me all over the Interwebs [chuckles]. You can find me at RampYourVoice.com, which is my website where you can read what I've written over the past for years as well as learn my services and supports in case you want me to write for you or be at a speaking engagement or learn how to support my work. I do have a donate page on there.

You can also find me on Facebook under the Ramp Your Voice page as well as on Twitter @VilissaThompson and also @RampYourVoice. And also through email at Vilissa@rampyourvoice.com. I'm always interested in meeting new people, particularly those of color, and supporting their work and collaborating and just really finding out who I may not know in the community that deserves to be uplifted and supported.

ALICE: How about you, s.e.?

s.e.: Well, you can find me on Twitter @sesmith. And if you like pictures of cats, I'm on Instagram @realsesmith. It includes adorable shelter cat photos; I will warn you now. My website is realsesmith.com. And that's kind of a good place to find archived website projects that I've worked on and sort of more broadly what I'm up to.

ALICE: Well, I really wanna thank you both so much for this illuminating and fantastic conversation.

This podcast is a production of the disability visibility project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

If you believe in supporting disabled media, subscribe to the Disability Visibility Podcast on iTunes and tell all your friends about it. You can also contribute one dollarq or more per month at our Patreon page at patreon.com/DVP. Everything's appreciated.

Thanks for listening and see ya on the Internets! Bye!